DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 298 CG 025 672

AUTHOR Gover, Jill
TITLE Building Self-Esteem.
PUB DATE [91]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Individual Development; Mental Health; Personality Problems; *Psychological Needs; *Self Concept; *Self Esteem
IDENTIFIERS *Intrapersonal Communication; *Self Affirmation; Self Empowerment

ABSTRACT

Self-esteem lies at the core of psychological health. This paper presents several strategies individuals might use for stopping negative self-criticism, overcoming self-rejection, and developing greater acceptance and compassion for themselves and others. The first step involves identifying any negative self-talk and then writing these thoughts down so as to examine them more easily. The critical voice may be disarmed by trying to understand its purpose. Typically, the critic voice tries to motivate through guilt. A healthier strategy for individuals would entail defining their values and then making decisions on what they want rather than what they think they should want. They may neutralize negative thoughts by realizing how much these thoughts then cost us and by affirming their strengths. The critical voice may also be weakened by establishing realistic goals and then outlining small steps to reach those goals. The point is to stretch a little and then enjoy the achievement. (RJM)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 373 298

# BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM

Jill Gover, Ph.D.

Self-esteem is at the core of pyschological health. How we feel about ourselves influences all aspects of our lives, and is essential in determining our behavior. Without a sense of self-efficacy and worthiness, life would be excruciatingly painful. Some people with low self-esteem who feel worthless, helpless, and hopeless (Beck) find that life is too painful to live and contemplate suicide as a way to stop the emotional pain. On the other hand, people with high self-esteem believe they are worthwhile, capable of helping themselves, and optimistic about the future. Each of us forms an identity and then attaches a meaning or value to that identity. When we believe we are important, we act in ways that support our belief. Vice versa, when we believe we are unimportant, stupid, incompetent, etc. we tend to act in ways that confirm that self-image. It's called *self-fulfilling prophecy*. So often, we are our own worst enemy, sabatoging and undermining our efforts. When we negatively judge and reject parts of ourselves we damage the psychological structures that form our sense of self. Initially, as babies, we have no judgement about ourselves or the world. As the center of the universe, babies love themselves unconditionally, and are not afraid to show delight in their own achievements. As we grow older, however, we experience judgement and rejection from others, and slowly we internalize this disapproval until we come to believe that there is something wrong, not just with what we did, but with who we are. We become our harshest critic, punishing and shaming ourselves. In order to avoid more judgements and self-rejection, we create defenses. We end up blaming others, bragging, making excuses, turning to alcohol or other drugs, or engaging in other self-destructive activities in order to not feel the pain caused by such self-rejection. It's as if some invisible, mean-spirited little creature were sitting at the back of our head, continually nitpicking, whispering critical comments, sabatoging our attempts to be successful. We must learn how to silence this critic voice in order to build our self-esteem. This paper presents several strategies for stopping the "Pathological Critic" (McKay), healing the wounds of self-rejection, and developing greater acceptance and compassion for ourselves and others.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

F. Gover

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CG025672

The "Pathological Critic" is a term coined by psychologist Eugen Sagan to describe the internal "nitpicker" that judges and attacks us. We all have some kind of critical inner voice, but people with low self-esteem have a more vicious and vociferous critic. The critic voice blames us for everything that goes wrong, compares us unfavorably to others, minimizes our successes, exaggerates our failures, and psychologically beats us up for every little mistake. In essence, the critic voice is a personification of all our cognitive distortions. These distortions in thinking, what we say to ourselves, erode our self-confidence and destroy our self-esteem.

To gain control of "the nitpicker" , we have to first be able to hear it. During our waking moments, we are continuously engaged in an internal monologue, automatic thoughts drifting through our consciousness. Some self-talk is helpful, and some is innocuous, but the negative self-talk of the critic is deleterious. However, we have heard the same put-downs in our head over and over again, day after day, until the thought becomes so automatic we don't even realize we're thinking it. Catching the nitpicker in the act requires focused attention. We have to monitor our thoughts, the way a security guard monitors a television screen. Everytime we identify a negative thought, it's important to write it down. By putting the nitpicker's attacks into words that "spotlight" the negative thoughts, we make it easier to examine them and conclude that they are filled with lies, tricks, and exaggerations.

Once we've identified the "pathological critic", "the nitpicker", "the critic voice" or whatever name you want to give to these self-destructive thoughts, the next step is to disarm the critic by unmasking its' purpose, talking back, and making it useless. Getting clear about the nitpicker's purpose puts everything it says into perspective and reduces the credibility of the attack. If my critic voice is putting me down, and I say to myself, "The nitpicker is beating me up, telling me I'm stupid, just like my ex-husband used to, and I'm believing you, nasty nitpicker, just like I believed him." Understanding the hidden agenda of *why* the nitpicker needs to put us down, helps us feel less vulnerable. Once we know the ulterior motive, the negative statement has less sting. For example, Susan's nitpicker told her that Jeffrey didn't like her, because after all she's a boring person and nobody likes her. Susan unmasked her nitpicker by identifying the underlying function the nitpicker served. Susan realized that the nitpicker was

telling her that Jeffrey didn't like her, so that she would be prepared for the worst and not as hurt if he rejected her. Her nitpicker was desensitizing her to the fear of rejection.

The best way to disarm the critic voice is to take away his power. When we understand what the critic does to sabatoge our efforts and why, we begin to see the critic's function and role in meeting our needs. If the critic's purpose is to protect us from rejection, or assuage our guilt, or push us to achieve, we need to find other, healthier ways to get those needs met. Typically, the critic functions to get us to do the "right thing" by coercing us with a lot of shoulds and guilt. A healthier strategy is to define values and base decisions on what we want rather than what we think we *should* want. The critic meets our need to feel worthy and important by setting perfectionistic standards. However, developing a realistic and accepting self-appraisal will increase our sense of worth more in the long run. The critic motivates us to achieve by psychologically beating us when we don't meet our goals. We know that punishment and fear may get results immediately, but over time they have pernicious effects. Instead of being motivated by the critic who attacks us if we don't achieve all our goals instantly, we can motivate ourselves by visualizing the positive consequences of success.

The critic voice also serves the important function of blocking painful feelings. Joan, a young mother, avoids feelings of inadequacy by setting high standards of perfection. Her critic voice assures her that she will be OK when she is perfect, so she drives herself in pursuit of perfection. Of course, no one is perfect, and so this is really a set-up to fail and feel even more inadequate, but until Joan recognizes the trap, she will succumb to her critic voice in an effort to block feelings of inadequacy. A healthier strategy for reducing feelings of inadequacy would be to make a realistic self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses which would allow for a more accurate self-appraisal.

Tim solves his fear of failure by listening to his critic voice that tells him he can't do it. As a result, he doesn't even try, and hence his fear of failure is abetted. A healthier strategy is to redefine the meaning of mistakes. When Tim believes that he has done the best he can given what's available to him at the time, he won't see mistakes as evidences of permanent failure.

Our self-esteem can't improve until we talk back and "counter-attack" the nitpicker. Learning to refute and reject old inaccurate negative messages from childhood is essential in forming a healthy self-concept. Growing up, some of us are inundated with negative messages about ourselves which come from a variety of different sources. When parents, siblings, peers, and other significant people in our lives are continually judgemental and critical of us, we develop a negative opinion about ourselves which damages our self-esteem. We have to declare war on that nitpicking critic inside of us, in order to silence it. There are several strategies for stopping the critic voice. One way to disarm a phony is to call its bluff. Look at the facts. Was the no a really big NO or just a "no thanks"? Does goofing up one time mean you ALWAYS goof things up? If you fail at one thing, does this negate everything you are good at? If you did something wrong, does this mean you are a terrible, bad person or that you made a poor choice in your behavior? Putting things in perspective diffuses the nitpicker who loves to lie, exaggerate, and distort reality.

Another effective strategy for disarming the critic is to think about the price you pay for his attacks. When we believe these negative thoughts about ourselves, it takes a serious toll on our self-esteem. Examining the "costs" of "buying" into the critic can provide us with a strong counter-attack. A 21 year old college student , Jim, evaluated the costs of his critic voice and discovered that his "price" included being defensive with his teachers around any criticism, blowing up at his girlfriend when she didn't do things his way, losing his roomate because he got hostile and defensive when his roomate pointed out how inconsiderate he had been, dumping on his mother when he detected the slightest criticism, and generally feeling anxious and on guard with people. When his critic voice started putting him down, he countered with the thought, " You make me defensive, you lose me friends, you make me say things I regret, you cost me too much. I'm not buying anymore."

Affirmations also weaken the nitpicker. We need to give ourselves permission to celebrate who we are. There are so many myths in our society about acknowledging our strengths. We're taught to believe that positive self-t k is "bragging or boasting", and patting ourselves or others on the back will cause a "swelled head" or reduce motivation to achieve. This "stroke deprivation" mentality, pervasive in this society, fuels the nitpicker and erodes our self-

esteem. When we are able to replace the critic voice with positive affirmations of our worth, we counter-attack and ultimately destroy the pathological critic. Even if we start off skeptical about the positive affirmation, if we say it enough times to ourselves, eventually we will believe it. Everytime we silence the critic and replace the negative self-talk with thoughts that affirm our strengths and worthiness as a human being, we wound the nitpicker and gain confidence in our ability to win the battle. Just as the critic voice can steer us on a downward spiral of low self-esteem and depression, affirmations can have a positive "domino effect". The better we feel about ourselves, the more likely we are to act in ways that make us feel even better about ourselves. The self-fulfilling prophecy works both ways.

Establishing realistic goals and developing objectives -small steps- to achieve those goals also enhances our self-esteem and weakens the critic voice. If my nitpicker is whispering "You never accomplish anything. You're such a loser!", remembering all the goals I've set for myself and achieved helps me to expose the nitpicker's lie. With each challenge we meet, our self-esteem grows. Goals don't need to dazzle the world. They need to be just big enough so that we can honestly feel proud of what we've done, without being overwhelmed. The point is to stretch ourselves just a little and then enjoy the healthy glow that comes from achievement.

These strategies are just a few out of many possible ways we can build self-esteem and rid ourselves of the critic "demon" inside our heads. There are no magic wands that instantly eliminate the critic voice, but over time these techniques will soften the voice until it is barely audible. Building self-esteem is a life-long process. Innumerable vicissitudes continually alter the fluid state of self-esteem. One day everything seems to be going our way, and the next day it all falls apart. However, the way we view these external events, and what we say to ourselves about our inner goodness has a lot to do with the slow and steady climb toward a healthy self-concept or the rapid descent into low self-esteem. The good news is that we CAN increase our self-esteem by learning to love and forgive ourselves the way we love and forgive others. When we expose that nasty, pesty nitpicker as a liar, we free ourselves from the chains of distortion and denial, and open the doors to a myriad of positive, wonderful possibilities.

## REFERENCES


Beck, A. (1967). *Cognitive Therapy and Emotional Disorders.* New York: Harper & Row.

Corporation for Public Broadcasting. (1990) *Celebrate Yourself: Six Steps to Building Your Self-Esteem.* Arlington, VA.: Custom Print.

McKay, M., Fanning, P. (1987). *Self-Esteem: A Proven Program of Cognitive Techniques for Assessing, Improving, and Maintaining Your Self-Esteem.* Oakland, Ca.: New Harbinger Publications.